

You Are the Light of the World



BY BARBARA H. GADON, INTERIM SENIOR MINISTER
FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

“Make of yourself a light,” said the Buddha upon his death. Like Jesus, he knew that he was light, and people were drawn to him. And they both knew, I think, that that was beside the point. They knew it was easier to idolize teachers than to actually listen to what they said and live accordingly. I imagine both of them saying different versions of “Don’t you get it? It’s not about me! You—you are the light of the world.”

We are more likely to be familiar with other passages that have Jesus saying *I am* the light of the world. I don’t blame the gospel writers for saying this. As Marcus Borg puts it, to the writer of John’s Gospel, Jesus was the light of *his* world. This is the traditional meaning of Christmas—Jesus as the light of the world. But given everything else Jesus said it seems far likelier that he would shift the focus away from himself.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven.”
(Matthew 5:14)

It’s easy to get a sense of a great teacher’s specialness. It’s harder to get a fix on their audience, the people their words were meant for, but as a Unitarian Universalist, that is my bigger concern. To be of value, such a teaching has to apply to everyone, no matter who they are, no matter what they believe, no matter whether they are especially great moral achievers or struggling to figure out the right thing to do, like the rest of us.

In his book in *Jesus and the Disinherited* the great African-American theologian Howard Thurman reminded us that Jesus’ message was intended for people with their backs to the wall. He was speaking to an incredibly poor audience. Jewish communities who were brutally occupied by the Romans, and were charged enormous taxes that would cost them their land when they couldn’t pay. Jesus gave them hope, gave them a sense that the divine spark—the kingdom of God—was within them. The oppressor need not have any power over them. “You are the light of the world,” he said. Not Caesar, not Rome. You.

Actual light—oil for lamps—was precious in those days, a rare commodity. A museum in Amsterdam recently held an exhibit called “House of Light,” which explained that it wasn’t until about 1800 that ordinary people could afford candles in their homes. You would hoard oil for your lamp carefully. It was precious. Poor people must have looked at the lighted homes of the rich with longing and envy.

The dark was darker for them, and more fearsome. No streetlights, nothing that would produce the kind of scattered light that obscures stars above many towns today. Christmas carols are full of the image of night: “O Holy Night,” “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear,” “Silent Night.” Christmas Eve was always more appealing to me as a child than Christmas Day—more magical, more evocative. But in those times, there was nothing romantic about the night. And a light appearing at night would have been a powerful spiritual symbol. Psychologically, it’s about something that wakens us out of our sleep, our usual inattentive state. Despair, even depression. If you’ve ever had a “dark night of the soul,” you know what I mean. This is what Jesus’ people were in.

Quest for meaning

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What is to give light
must endure burning.

—Viktor Frankl

A monthly for religious liberals

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They also lived in fear. “Fear not” was an important and often repeated message of Jesus. And he probably did see fear in them. Why else would you say it? Jesus looks at the frightened folk, and says *Even if you have no money, no power, no status, you are light. There is a power within you that is God, that is light. You don’t need to be afraid.*

“The light of the world” was a common expression in Jewish tradition at that time. Rabbis taught that God was the light of the world, or that the Torah or the tribe of Israel was the light of the world. So saying “You are the light of the world” to ordinary people, most of whom were poor and struggling, was something radically different. Different ways to understand this might be: *You are like God. Or, You have God in you. Or, Your heart is as important as the Torah.* It would have startled most people; it would have enraged the priests as blasphemy. It would also have given people hope.

But you do have an obligation to the light. The second part of this passage is definitely harder. Jesus here expects us to shine, to use the precious oil, to burn it up. “A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all the house.” This involves a certain amount of risk.

In Minnesota, where I come from, my people do not encourage flagrant light-shining. We had words for people who (shudder) drew attention to themselves—show-offs, grand-standers—those people who made spontaneous speeches at parties or burst into song because they couldn’t help themselves. Cold looks and a particular sound we made—a tick, a sigh—were barely audible, but it was all it took to douse the light.

We may not resonate with the notion of letting our light “give glory to our father in heaven,” but it’s just another way to say that burning your light,

spending yourself, is for something greater than just you. John F. Kennedy’s famous words: “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country,” are another way to express this notion. We sense somehow that it’s kind of boring just to shine our light for ourselves. The spiritual life is about finding our connection to that bigger life. To find something that is worth burning our light for—the light that isn’t just about us. (*It’s not about me*, I repeat to myself from time to time. Sometimes

We sense somehow that it’s kind of boring just to shine our light for ourselves.

a lot.) It’s a spiritual lesson we’ll probably be working on for generations. It’s not about you. And still, burn your light.

Mary Oliver writes, “Clearly I’m not needed, yet I find myself turning into something of inexplicable value.” I am reminded of a funeral I conducted a few years ago, along with our minister of music. We were called on behalf of a couple whose two-year-old son had died of leukemia. He was certainly the light of his parents’ life. They had given everything to the fight for his life. They moved from Washington, D.C. to the Ronald McDonald House at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota to devote full time to his recovery. His mother and her parents quit their jobs. There are times in your life when you have to completely give yourself over to someone or something, and this was it for them. They burned their light for him. And now he was gone.

The family had originally requested just a few words at the cemetery—nothing religious, they “weren’t religious people.” Soon it became apparent that much more was needed, as scores and scores of people were going to come. We sometimes don’t know what

a light we are, even in a brief span of time. They didn’t fully realize this about their son.

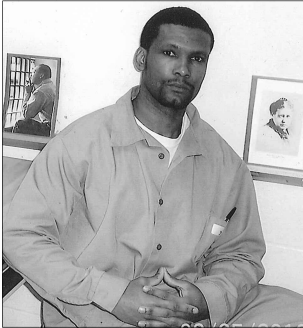
Need I tell you it was painful? A casket is not supposed to be so small. We ended with a large candle in the middle of a table to represent his life, and surrounded it with smaller tea candles. People were invited to come and light a candle from the larger one to express how his life touched their own. And so they came forward, silently, tearfully, some hesitantly. And when all 300 or so had come and lit a candle, we blew out the large candle, and said, “The light that was his life on earth has gone out; but look at the light he has left behind.” It was beautiful. His grandmother ran out to the car to get her camera; no one thought there would be anything they would want a picture of. *Even if you only live less than two years, you are light, those candles said. You touch the world.*

Jesus and Buddha looked at the crowd and saw light. They were not speaking to people who already knew this. Notice that Jesus did not say, “Blessed are the powerful, the wealthy, the popular. Blessed are the handsome; blessed are the cool.” He was speaking to the rest of us. You, whose marriage failed, or who remained single in a world where people are expected to be married—you are light. You with a jailed child, you are light. Your child is, too. You who work at a job you hate, you who lost your job—you are light. You are light when you don’t like yourself very much, when you have failed. That’s the miracle of the light—God in you—it’s still there and it can be there even against your will.

Hiding it makes no sense; why waste something so precious? And yet we do. They didn’t say you could be light some day if you worked hard at it, were good enough, or did something worthwhile with your life. You, now. Make of yourself a light. Every night a child is born is a holy night. You are the light of the world. ■

Hope: The Theology of Despair

BY DANIEL A. GREEN, CLF MEMBER,
NORTH CAROLINA



The truth is that I am not an authority on hope. Until recently I didn't even know

what hope was: I thought it was something akin to a wish, a pipedream.

I was partly right. Hope is about wishing, but there's another element involved: expectation. Expectation that what we so fervently desire can be obtained. In a nutshell, to hope is to trust in the future as if it were a fountain of opportunity. But what if your past and present are mocking reminders that, too often, the viability of hope is determined by those events beyond your comprehension and control?

We are all children of ourselves. Who we are today—our attitudes, the nature of our perception about the world, about ourselves, and the connection between them—have been produced by our responses to hope, and its shadowy counterpart, despair. The two cannot be separated. My great-grandmother was the daughter of ex-slaves. She came of age during the Great Depression. She was a cynic by necessity. Whenever someone spoke of hope she would give the same aphoristic response, "Hope in one hand and doo-doo in the other and see which hand gets fullest the fastest." (Actually, she used a more colorful word than doo-doo.)

In retrospect, I can see that she was emphasizing the importance of spending more time actualizing our aspirations rather than vocalizing them. But, being a child, I received her words as affirming my growing suspicion that

hope was no more valuable than, well...the "number two." It was a dark epiphany.

At the age of nine I adopted a new resolution to go with my epiphany: "Expect the worst and you will never be disappointed." This outlook on life bent my forced precocity into a warped shell—a shield I brandished like the head of Medusa, freezing all potential, all hope, into stone monuments of relinquished dreams. The solidification of this attitude was one of the final gifts I accepted from my father.

Hopelessness is the root of all deviant behavior.

I barely knew my dad. He had spent five of the first eight years of my life in prison. Still, I loved him as if he was the world's best father. Every day I wore with pride the leather belt and wallet he made for me in prison.

I had only seen him once since his release, but now this was Christmas and I knew that today—unlike the other times—he would not stand us up. I was certain that he would come to see my sister and me with the gifts that Santa Claus had neglected to bring to us the night before. He had promised. Each time we heard the sound of a car coming down the dirt road to my grandmother's green cinderblock home, we would rush to the door, excitedly expecting it to be him.

Finally, after the sun dipped low behind the pine trees that bordered the soybean field in front of the house, it dawned on me. He was not coming. Not ever.

A glass I was holding slipped from my hand and shattered on the cracked linoleum of the kitchen floor—an apt metaphor for my disillusionment and loss of hope. I felt stupid for believing

him and ashamed of the tears that I could not stop from falling in front of my mother.

The years that followed were even more traumatic: several murders in the family—one at the hands of another family member—attending nine different schools in three different states, being homeless, subjected to racism... life challenges that a lot of people endure and emerge victorious from. Me? It took time to recover my hope. Actually, it took receiving time.

I am 36 years old. For the last two decades of my life I have lived in the most hopeless places in the state of North Carolina—its prisons. In here the most oft-repeated axioms are "We can't never win," and "They do what they wanna do"—"they" being those in positions of authority.

The one trait that most criminals share is hopelessness. Hopelessness is the root of all deviant behavior. Hopelessness tells us that the future is bleak, that all we have is the present moment. If our personality can be viewed as a chain of memories, hopelessness is the broken link that keeps us from even considering that we are larger than this moment, larger than these bodies, larger than our cultural and national identities. It cuts us off from the recognition that humanity, with all of its accomplishments and failures, is embodied in each person.

My hope was restored by degrees, and I did not do it alone. It has been a group effort. Even during months and years when I had no outside contact I have always felt a part of the "interdependent web of existence of which we are a part." Knowing the truth about why I am in prison, it would be easy to give up hope, embrace bitterness and become what I was portrayed to be. But studying us—humanity—I know and am convinced that the only thing that separates angels from demons is that the latter gave up hope and in doing so came to personify hopelessness and all of its fruit.

There can be no rehabilitation, no reform without hope. Learning from my peers, from the greatest minds, like Emerson and Dr. King, gives me hope. Challenging those who work to keep me in prison, without resorting to lies, and while maintaining my compassion, gives me hope. People like Chaplain Pat—who puts extra care into making sure that UUs in prison stay connected to all of you in the “free world”—give me hope and inspiration. The fact that you donate time and money to spreading and promoting our values and principles gives me hope.

Most of all, my mother’s support and friendship, her strength and resilience, gives me hope that I can live as courageously as she has in a life of brutal adversity and struggle.

Hope, to me, is the mental, emotional and spiritual equivalent of that ineffable force that holds the universe together, and which has given the universe the ability to look upon itself through our eyes, and marvel at the breadth of its diverse and infinite beauty. Hope is not merely an attitude. It is our birthright. ■

Spreading Hope

The CLF offers UU spiritual support by mail to over 400 prisoners who’ve joined our church. Non-incarcerated UUs serve as an important part of this outreach through volunteering as UU pen pals for our prisoner-members.

Prisoners are told only the first name of their pen pal, and they send their letters to the CLF office for forwarding. The CLF staff remains available for advice and support.

You can read the *Guidelines* for the CLF’s Letter Writing Ministry at www.clfuu.org/prison_ministry or write to pfranz@clfuu.org to request an info/application packet. ■

Hope and Sorrow



BY MARK BELLETINI,
SENIOR MINISTER,
FIRST UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST
CHURCH OF
COLUMBUS, OHIO

I had a very different sermon

prepared for Christmas Eve, and I tossed it just a few hours before the service rolled around. A more sparkling, effervescent sermon, it was.

As I was just finishing the last rewrite of the original text, my sister Lynne called and told me that our brother Robert, a recovering alcoholic, had relapsed. He was a complete mess when she went to pick him up and bring him to our parents’ house for Christmas Eve. Yellow eyes, unkempt, depressed. Drunk. Unable to stand up.

We spent a long time talking about what to do next. Christmas Eve is not the best time to pursue detox options.

But I was aware that I just didn’t have it in me to deliver a sermon based on the reality that I was part of before my sister called. The tougher reality that seized my heart that night had to be the basis of my reflections. There could be no clarity, no affection, no honesty, and no real exuberance for the holiday without facing the harder truths. After all, hope is the theme of the season, remember. And hope is not cheap optimism, which is often just a sense of entitlement. Rather, hope is the main-spring of a life that neither denies the past nor romances the future.

But it seems to me that hope in the midst of hard reality is the purpose of the Christmas story Luke tells. A story of poverty, heavy taxes, and a difficult family situation is hardly a pretty tale for children all dolled up with pink bows. Birth itself is not an easy thing—ask any woman—especially back in those days. The shepherds in

the story may have had a wondrous experience, but from all we know about the shepherds of ancient times, their reputation wasn’t much better than a gang of modern thugs. They were not the kind of folks anyone would want crowding into their maternity room.

The Christmas story has lots of tough elements in it. But think. How many stories of people you know are not fraught with hardship and difficulties? Most life stories I can think of, my own included, and yours, fill the bill almost as well as this ancient story.

And yet, in the midst of the Christmas story, which makes the difficulties plain and obvious, we hear, like some far off angel-song, that something remarkable is still possible in this world. Something like hope is stirring. Something that might not be as obvious as the march of legions, the sound of the war trumpet or the clatter of coins on the tax table. But still something... tender skin, skin still red and wet, a voice crying out, new life.

The story doesn’t describe the birth as miraculous at all. According to what we know from medical manuals of the time, like the writing of Soranus of Ephesus, the birth depicted in the story was very typical. Doctor Soranus recommended that newborns be laid in a nest of hay, a pressed down channel of the house cattle feeder, so that the child wouldn’t be able to turn over. Wrapped up tight in small strips of cloth already moistened with olive oil, the baby was protected from accidentally hurting its own eyes with its roaming hands. Both pre-natal and post-natal care for peasant babies was quite sophisticated. Just because people are poor doesn’t mean they don’t know anything, you see. Just because the Romans were oppressive didn’t mean everyone just gave up. Just because taxes were high and unfair didn’t mean people just laid down and died.

No, they lived and struggled to make the best life they could.

And please, they weren't waiting around for a Messiah to come along either. That is a Sunday school fairy tale. It is simply not true. Oh, there were a few eccentric folks in Judea who talked about anointed characters who might come along one day. Always in the plural, mind you, never anything called "THE messiah." They imagined there might be a clever anointed priest one day who would help explain things better. Or some wily warrior king who would work with the priest to push foreign oppression away. But they were not sitting around waiting for some godlike being to be born and change everything once and for all—make the world perfect, bring heaven down to earth and fasten it tight. No, none of that.

The reason people teach that fairy tale is because of theology. The earliest students of Jesus knew him as a person, a fellow peasant. But those who came after him didn't know him as a peasant, only as an idea, the subject of wonderful stories. So they tried to fit him into their theological framework to make sense of these stories. So they took all of these strange ideas of anointed characters from the fringes of Judaism, and said that he was, in Hebrew, *ha-meshiakh*; in Greek, *ho-khristos*; or in English, the Messiah, or the Christ.

They were taking all of these distinct ideas and combining them into one super Messiah. It was their way of trying to show how much they thought of him. How much they loved him. But within only 40 years of his death, people like Paul were calling him, not by his name, but by this newly invented tribute. Christ Jesus, Paul called him, not Jesus of Galilee.

But he himself was just a peasant artisan. Born in a poor family, probably somewhere up in the Galilee. Born of parents who were not, I repeat, *not*, waiting for a Messiah.



Oh, they were waiting of course. Just not for a Mes-

siah. They waited for the crops to come in. They waited for the midwife to arrive on time for the birthing. They waited for the honey production to finish. They waited for the wine to ferment. They waited for the bread to rise. They waited for the storm to pass, the temper to soften, the love to return, the child to fall asleep. They were, I think, a lot like us.

...hope in the midst of hard reality is the purpose of the Christmas story Luke tells.

They had to struggle to get by. Like us. The economy wasn't any better then than it is now. Ups and downs. Bad decisions and terrible consequences. But Rosemary Radford Reuther has this to say about struggle:

Within the bounds of present life, struggle itself is its own reward. It is in the process of struggle against debased existence, with the attendant demands for becoming more sensitive, more self-disciplined, with a constant resetting of one's sights upon the vision of salvation, that one is closest to the secret of human life.

The secret of human life. Large words, those, yet somehow they ring as true.

Struggle is its own reward. What does that mean? I think of the struggle my family has faced with my brother's deep despair, his debased sense of self and vision. I think of the decisions that have had to be made, the struggle to understand.

I think of my family of origin, my brother and my sister, a family no different in many ways from that ancient family we lift up each Christmas. Mediterranean peasants. Living with expectations—yes, they, for the next crop and for the storm to pass; yes, we, for my brother's life to become honest and healthy again—but struggling and

struggling to live out lives in the midst of all that expectation.

But, like they had in ancient times, we too have a few tools to help us as we struggle.

Mary had a peasant's sense of medicine, and peasants, as I often remind us, were not at all foolish. She very well understood the uses of olive oil, strips of cloth and a bed of hay.

My sister and I are not professional alcoholism workers. But we are not foolish either. We have a peasant sense of psychology, and understand the uses of patience, and direct naming of issues, supportive conversation, and interventions. Heck, we even have the internet, the yellow pages, and wise friends, too!

Just as, in the story, the couple had to travel far before the birth begins, so have my sister and brother and I. We will start on that journey many times perhaps, and perhaps the outcome will not be as beautiful as in the Christmas story...who knows? It's hardly like hope comes with promises tied to it with bows. But in the words of James Broughton:

*Even if I never arrive
I shall keep departing
I believe in the unreachable,
the unlikely, and the unmentionable.*

I do believe in my brother's sobriety. I know that many struggles, many journeys, *do* end in transformation, in new birth, in unmentionable angels cartwheeling in the background and singing lovely theology: God's glory is not like Caesar's, full of sound and fury, pocked with weapons and cruelty. It's people, ordinary people, peasants and everyone, at peace, getting along, cooperating, honest, and not afraid. It's goodwill and all that.

But the struggle itself, says Reuther, is the reward. The struggle to be honest, to embrace the difficult. And this is the struggle my sister's phone call offered me. Not the gift I was expecting. But a sacred call nonetheless. ■



From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

According to Joshua Friedman, an astrophysicist at the University of Chicago, “All the visible world that we see around us is just the tip of the iceberg.” An article in *Science News Magazine* says that 70% of the universe is “a mysterious entity known as dark energy that pervades all of space, pushing it apart at an ever-faster rate.”

Now, the term “dark energy” can be used to mean frightening or cruel or evil energy. Kind of how Voldemort, the Dark Lord in the Harry Potter books, might be presumed to wield dark energy. But I think of dark energy very differently, as do the scientists. By dark energy, I mean energy that is mysterious, unnamed, as yet unexplored. (I won’t attempt to say what the scientists mean!)

For those of us in cold climates, winter is a good time to ponder dark energy and what gifts it might offer to us. Often, the metaphor for hope is a candle, or a star, or a light, shining in the darkness. Lights are important to help us to see, to guide us. I love the Christmas season when neighbors, for no motivation other than joy and beauty, fill their trees with lights, hang lights on their gutters, put candles in their windows. What’s not to love about light?

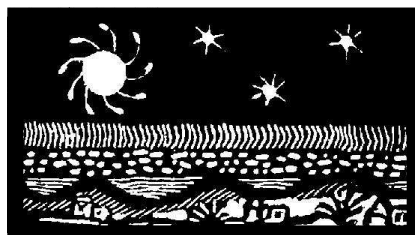
But while we are all grateful for the lanterns, beacons and lighthouses that keep us on our course, I don’t think the light is where we primarily find hope. I think that the actual stuff of hope, the actual mysterious components that create it, can be found in the darkness, though we need to haul it out into the light if we are to describe it to one another. In the darkness we sense there is something new we need to see, and we fumble for the match to light the can-

dle. In that impulse—the desire to see and the fumbling for light—is the birth of hope. Finding hope takes place in darkness, and the hope we find becomes light when we are moved to share it with each other. It is because we have been in darkness that we are moved to light lanterns for each other.

For instance, you tell me amazing stories from your lives. You tell me that because of a line about loving-kindness

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in one of Lynn Ungar’s *Quest* columns, your heart opened, despite almost two decades spent in prison, where to behave kindly is dangerous. You tell me that because of finding this online community of open-spirited living, and finally having someone affirm your own experience of your lived faith, you were moved to contact a friend whom you treated badly long ago. You tell me that you are determined to find love, even though you are not sure how you will do it and were not taught to expect it as a child, when you learned cruelty instead. You tell me that you yell at your kids, and you hate that you do so and you want to stop, but you don’t know how. You tell me, over and over, that what you know is just the tip of the iceberg and that underneath it, mysteriously, some accelerating force compels you to change your course, even now, even here.



When you honor me by sharing these stories, you may feel you are wandering in the darkness, but your very courage to be there gives me hope. Your stories—often full of more questions than answers, often including phrases like “I don’t know,” “overwhelmed,” “lost”—your very stories give me hope, because by telling them you are claiming your own worth and value.

You share your stories believing that I, too, will see their worth and value, thus according me that most precious gift of any season—trust. I find hope in your courage to confide your story to me or to other CLF members in covenant groups, Facebook groups, list serves, classes. The hope is in your longing—longing that is bigger than your pain. Because even in your pain you are saying, “I know that this is the tip of the iceberg,” and you are resting deeply on the large part of the universe that is mystery, that will hold you.

I sometimes hear pundits or other cultural voices say something like this: “At my age, nothing really surprises me any more.” But that’s not what I hear from CLF members, nor what I experience myself. We are saying: At every age, until the moment we draw our last breath, there is still room to be surprised. There is still room to learn, to grow, to open, to accompany one another on our journeys, no matter where those journeys may lead.

Hope is not for the naïve, for the young, for the unseasoned. Hope is always beckoning to us, no matter whether we can see it, no matter whether we can put it into words; no matter whether it comes in the form we expected it. Hope pervades all of life, if we have the courage to see it. And once we know it, we feel no choice but to offer it to others as a gift.

Be kind to yourselves in this hectic season. Allow yourselves time to soak in the darkness, to allow it to nurture your deepest places, to allow yourself to know that, especially where you can’t see it, you are held. ■

REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

Have you seen the musical *Into the Woods*? It's a Broadway show in which a variety of storybook characters—Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, Jack (of the Beanstalk), etc.—meet up together in an adventure in the woods, which ends with the kind of happily-ever-after weddings and wealth and long-awaited babies that you expect from the end of a fairy tale. Except that all that happens in the first act. The second act shows what happens *after* happily ever after, when wedded bliss turns to boredom and the giant comes back for his stolen property. The story that happens after the end of the story turns out to be rather more complicated than the first act finale, and the happiness at the end is not so simple and clear.

The Hanukkah story, it turns out, is rather like that. You probably remember the story of the Maccabees, and how they gathered a band of fellow Jews to fight back against the ruling government that was oppressing them. You have likely heard the story of their heroic and improbable victory, and how, after long years of battle, they were able to return to their Temple, clear away all the desecration and damage, and return to the free practice of their religion.

What you might not have heard is the story that comes after the story. We tend not to mention, in that time between lighting candles and eating latkes when stories are told, that the Hebrew victory didn't last very long. We never get around to talking about the second act, where it turns out that not only was it not very long before the Jewish lands were occupied territory again, but also that later rebellions, modeled on the Maccabean revolt, turned out to be dismal failures which left the Jewish people worse off than they were before.



However, the story of the oil that burned in the sacred temple lamp for eight days when

there was only enough oil to last for one day comes from this "second act" time in history. The legend of the miraculous oil came along not during the time of the victory, but rather during a later time of defeat. And the second act story carries a far different message. The first act story of the Hebrew victory over the Syrians says that if you are brave enough and determined enough then you can make things turn out all right.

If

you can be daring and

strong and hold fast to your faith then you will win in the end. It's a good message, one that parents like to teach their children.

Unfortunately, the painful lessons of life teach us that that lovely message isn't always true. Sometimes the bad guys win. Sometimes your best efforts aren't enough to make things turn out the way you'd hoped. Anyone who has lost a hard-fought baseball game or political election knows this is so. Sometimes life is flat-out unfair, and people win by cheating, or go to jail for crimes that they didn't commit. Doing your best is simply no guarantee that everything will be fine. Which is why the second act of the Hanukkah story needs a different message, the message of the oil that kept burning long after it should have been gone.

That story says something very different than "If you just try hard enough then you will win." The story of the lamp that wouldn't go out says something much more like: "Hold on to your light, and let it shine, even when it doesn't seem like you can go on any further. There is enough light to get us through. The holy will always shine through us, however long the night may be."

The story of the victory of the Maccabees is a story of strength and daring. But the story of the oil which kept burning until more oil could be made is a story of hope. It admits that we are not always in control, and that sometimes things aren't okay. And it declares that in the midst of not okay we can still go on, can still offer our little light to the world.

Hope, the kind of hope the oil story talks about, isn't about assuming that everything will be fine. This kind of deep, religious hope has more to do with knowing that even in the middle of the mess of life there is still

enough beauty and compassion and grace to carry us forward. People will die and folks who don't deserve it will suffer, and

we can't stop that. But we can be a light, and we can take courage from the lights of others.

The traditional song for Hanukkah is "*Maoz Tzur*," in English, "Rock of Ages." But I have another song in mind. This year after I light the Hanukkah candles I think I'll sing: *This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine. This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine. This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine. Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.* ■





Church of the Larger Fellowship
Unitarian Universalist

25 Beacon Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02108-2823
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Quest Editorial Team: Meg Riley; Lorraine Dennis; Celeste DeRoche; Janet Lane; Beth Murray; Cindy Salloway; Jaco ten Hove;
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CLF Staff : Meg Riley, senior minister; Lorraine Dennis, executive director; Lynn Ungar, minister for lifespan learning and Quest editor; Patty Franz, prison ministry director; Kristin Schmidt, minister in residence; Joanna Crawford, ministerial intern; Mary Frances Comer, pastoral care associate; Beth Murray, PR & program administrator; Cindy Salloway, fiscal administrator; Lisa Kielt, development director; Sue Conley, membership assistant

Web Site www.clfuu.org — E-mail clf@clfu.org — Jewelry 617-948-6150 — Minister's Toll-Free Line 800-231-3027
CLF Unitarian Universalist, 25 Beacon St., Boston MA 02108 USA — Telephone 617-948-6166 — Fax 617-523-4123

Looking For a Sunset Bird in Winter

BY ROBERT FROST

The west was getting out of gold,
The breath of air had died of cold,
When shoeing home across the white,
I thought I saw a bird alight.

In summer when I passed the place
I had to stop and lift my face;
A bird with an angelic gift
Was singing in it sweet and swift.

No bird was singing in it now.
A single leaf was on a bough,
And that was all there was to see
In going twice around the tree.

From my advantage on a hill
I judged that such a crystal chill
Was only adding frost to snow
As gilt to gold that wouldn't show.



A brush had left a crooked stroke
Of what was either cloud or smoke
From north to south across the blue;
A piercing little star was through. ■